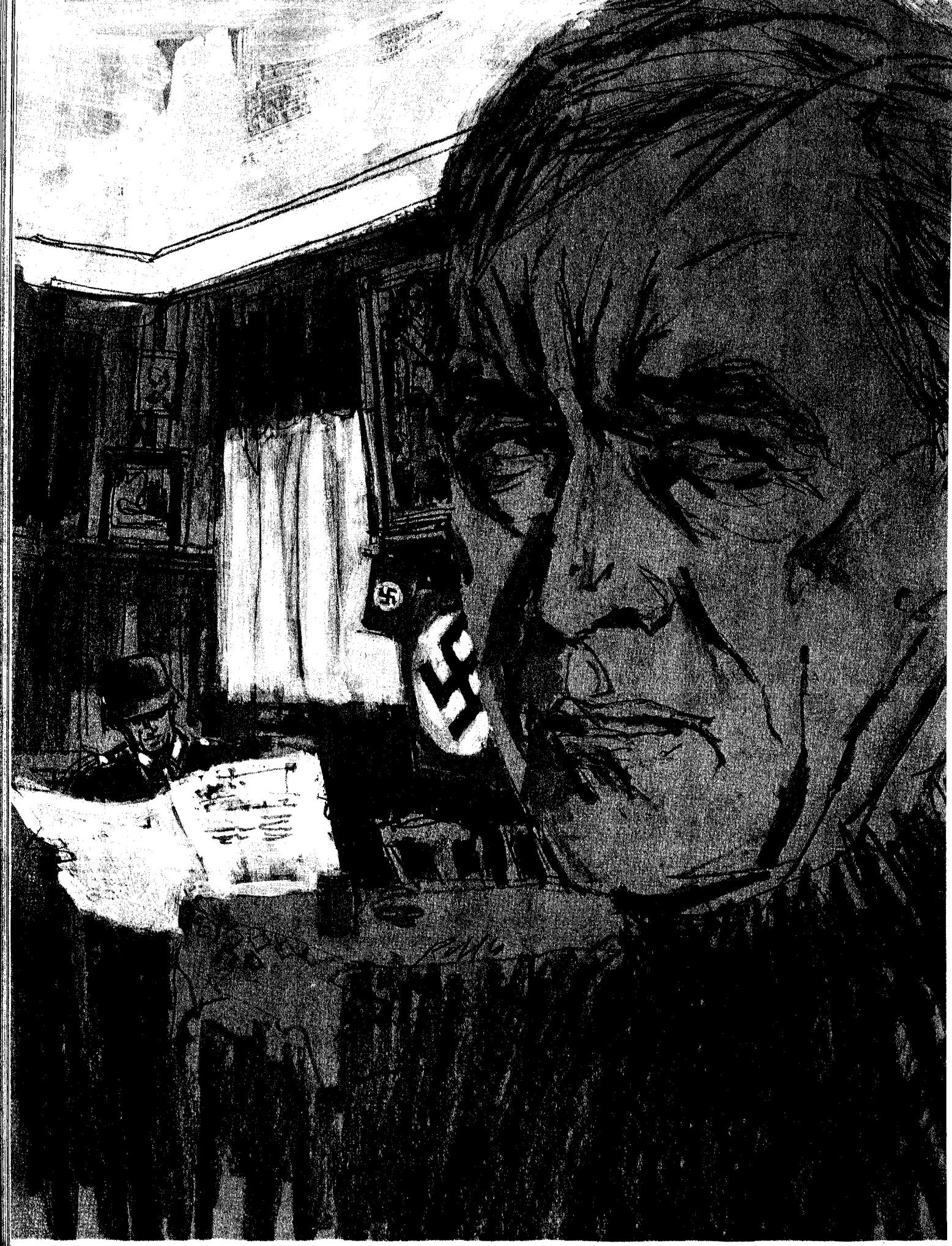


CONTENTS

MY LIFE AND HARD TIMES ON A CASTING COUCH.....	Terri Swinnerton as told to Jay Solo	4
<i>Movietown chick is not prone to argue</i>		
SOLDIER OF MISFORTUNE.....	W. E. Sprague	6
<i>It was cross and double-cross for life and love</i>		
THE HARLOTS OF SATAN.....	E. V. Griffith	10
<i>True accounts of the hell cults' black joys</i>		
HYMIE RAISES BEAUTIFUL CAMELLIAS.....	Raymond Friday Locke	14
<i>The story of Hymie Fox — his cats, his camellias — and the rest</i>		
WILL SHE OR WON'T SHE?.....	Georgie Starbuck Galbraith	18
<i>Female gambits in the game of sex</i>		
A DARK AND SILVER CORD.....	Con Sellers	22
<i>Jim was almost free from a tangle of forbidden love</i>		
SEXUAL PROMISCUITY AND ITS TREATMENT.....	Dr. Arnold Goldberg	26
<i>Exclusive interview with a prominent psychiatrist</i>		
THE LOST RIVER.....	Wyatt Blessingame	30
<i>Now that he had found his swamp angel he was about to lose his life</i>		
WHAT HAS HE DONE NOW?.....	D. G. Lloyd	34
<i>Irreverent interview with proud papa</i>		
MORGAN.....	Richard Wolkomir	42
<i>Newsman on the skids is faced with last chance</i>		
THE BEAUTIFUL LADY OF THE HILLS.....	Brett Howard	50
<i>Eerie tale of the Baroness who wasn't there</i>		
SOUTH OF TIJUANA SEX.....	Hank Wadsworth	58
<i>Swinging sin below the border</i>		
THE PEASANT'S REVENGE.....	Robert Blake	66
<i>In which clever cuckoldry is twice arranged</i>		
A THING CALLED DUTY.....	Clive Stoddard	70
<i>Steven had more to fear from his buddies than from the rebels</i>		
DOLPHINS: THE FAIR RACE.....	Gary Paulsen	74
<i>Are there creatures on our planet smarter than we?</i>		
YOUR OWN LITTLE WORLDS.....	Charles L. Bolsinger	78
<i>A gob's wild ride through the night</i>		
EXIT POINT.....	Jack Ritchie	82
<i>He was scant yards from freedom when the enemy appeared</i>		
BRITAIN'S BIG BOOM IN BIGAMY.....	Paul Brock	86
<i>Plural marriage craze hits the tight little isle</i>		
ADAM'S BEDSIDE TALES.....		90
<i>Titters & Snickers from cads, goldfish, and Khrushchev</i>		
THE FACE IN MY WINDOW.....	Jake Barnes	94
<i>It was kill or be killed by the nightmarish old man</i>		
THE GIRL WHO GOT SHOOK.....	William Earls	98
<i>He was America's oldest teenager, and he preached love</i>		

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JOHN R. GERARD, Editor-in-chief/SIDNEY CORTEZ, Associate Editor/FRANK EDWARD LEE, Art Director



He was only steps away from freedom when the enemy appeared . . . but who was his real enemy?

Exit Point

by JACK RITCHIE

YES, HE HAD DONE it at last.

Just a matter of a few hundred yards more and he would be safe in Switzerland.

Second Lieutenant James Stafford, Army of the United States, and recently *Stalag IX*, watched the solitary border guard lounging on the Austrian side of the bridge below.

Stafford felt certain that his own forged papers would be good enough to pass any inspection. But even if they shouldn't be, there was really nothing to worry about. The guard appeared to be elderly and it should be a simple matter to brush him aside and sprint the remaining few yards into Swiss territory.

Stafford began walking down the slope toward the bridge, still remembering to limp. There was nothing wrong with his leg, but in these times the sight of an able-bodied man not in uniform might invite unnecessary suspicion and questions.

In the last year, Stafford had learned that little details can be very important.

On his first escape attempt, the camp committee had provided him with forged papers, money, and German civilian clothes, and Stafford had thought that he blended perfectly with the other Germans at that railroad station.

And yet the brace of policemen, glancing over the crowd, had singled him out and begun asking questions. His answers in halting German had been enough to bring about his recapture less than twenty miles from the *Stalag*.

At police headquarters, a sergeant had provided the explanation. "You were waiting for a train which daily carries business men to Berlin — commuters, I believe you call them in America — and you were the only man on the platform who was not carrying a briefcase. Naturally you were conspicuous."

Five months later, when Stafford escaped again, he had improved his German considerably and he carried a briefcase.

He made it all the way to the Bremen waterfront. It was here that

he discovered that not all Swedes are neutral or friendly. The third mate of a freighter proved to be one of these exceptions and Stafford had been flushed out of the hold by a German patrol before the vessel could leave port.

Yes, escaping from the barbed wire compounds had been difficult, but that had been only a part of the job. Perhaps the least part.

This time twenty-four men had crawled through that tunnel and they had scattered. Stafford had chosen to go southeast alone.

And now as he entered the small border village, he hesitated. His eyes went to the bridge and the single guard ahead. A mere fifty yards to freedom.

He grinned slowly. I'm just like a schoolgirl, he thought, polishing and polishing my apple and putting off the delicious moment of actually eating it.

His grin widened as his eyes caught the sign at the local inn. It is a warm afternoon, he told himself. Quite warm. I wouldn't want to walk into Switzerland all hot and thirsty.

He turned into the coolness of the inn. At this early hour of the afternoon he was the only patron. He ordered a beer and then took the Stein to a table near the open door.

He picked up the folded newspaper on the table in front of him and tore off the retaining band. Ah, yes, he had read this edition while breakfasting at Dornbirn, but evidently it had just been delivered here now.

He turned to page three. Not at all a bad likeness.

He read the paragraphs again. During the past three weeks, all of the others had been re-taken, one by one. Stafford was the only escapee still at large.

He smiled. Just over that bridge and then to get quietly in touch with the American counsel and arrangements would be made to smuggle Stafford out of the neutral country back to the American army.

Would any of them still be with the company? Captain Jarvis? Morrison? Lambert?

Probably not. Wars moved fast and

things changed, especially in infantry companies. Jarvis was undoubtedly a major by now and Morrison a captain. If they were still . . .

Stafford finished his beer and looked toward the bridge. A smile played on his lips. Just a few minutes more. Just one more beer.

He went back to the bar with his empty stein.

Stafford heard the footsteps and he stiffened as a young German army sergeant appeared beside him.

But the soldier glanced at him only perfunctorily and ordered a beer. He carried the full Stein to the seat Stafford had just vacated. He picked up the newspaper.

Stafford found himself trembling. Now is the time to leave. Before he turns the page. Just stroll by him casually.

But his legs seemed rooted to the floor and he stared at the sergeant. Four minutes . . . five . . .

Stafford found himself sweating and remembering Africa. It had been fourteen months since he had surrendered his platoon. It had been his first day in combat . . . and he had thought there were more Germans than just that one squad . . . and there had been all that noise . . . and he remembered the cold unbelieving eyes of his platoon sergeant when Stafford had stood up and raised his hands . . .

Now the German sergeant turned the page. He stared at the photograph and then looked up at Stafford. Recognition came into his eyes.

Stafford wiped at the perspiration with his handkerchief. I guess it's all over. Just one of those things. He straightened a bit. It's an officer's duty to attempt to escape and it takes courage. And they all admire me for that. He nodded to himself. The next time I'll try that route to Spain. And if that doesn't work, I guess I'll make for the English Channel the time after that. There are all kinds of possibilities, but it's not my fault if something goes wrong the last minute.

When Unteroffizier Mueller put his hand firmly on Stafford's shoulder, the second lieutenant tried desperately to keep the look of relief out of his eyes.